

Roberto Clemente: Hero and Friend

by Irma Zepeda



What makes a hero? Perhaps it is courage and the desire to help others. Find out about the life of a hero.

Connect to Your Life

Who are your heroes? What stories about heroes have your parents shared? With a partner, make a list of heroes. Talk about their qualities and actions.

Key to the Biography

This true account of Clemente's life includes terms and figures about baseball. If necessary, reread those sections to make sure you understand them. Roberto Clemente started out on a team in the *minor leagues* of baseball. There, players develop their skills. If their abilities impress others, they move up to the *major leagues*.

Vocabulary Preview

Words to Know

determined	prejudice
prospects	potential



Reading Coach CD-ROM selection

FOCUS

Learn about the goal Roberto Clemente sets early in his life.

Roberto Clemente was born on August 18, 1934. He was born on the island of Puerto Rico. Roberto's family lived in a small house in the town of Carolina. Like most families there, the Clementes worked hard to earn a living. Roberto's father worked long days cutting sugar cane. In his spare time, he also sold meat and other foods to earn a few extra dollars. To help the family, the Clemente children held odd jobs. Roberto delivered milk for a
10 few pennies a day.

The Clementes could not buy any luxuries—not even a baseball for Roberto. Instead, Roberto and his friends used sticks to practice batting cans. They had no gloves, pads, or even a real bat. They simply loved the game. To Roberto, baseball players were heroes. He dreamed of becoming a great player someday. Roberto was determined to work hard to make his dream come true.

determined

(dĭ tŭr' mĭnd)

adj. not willing to
change one's
mind

to go to college. After Roberto pleaded with them, they finally gave in.

The next season, the Dodgers held a clinic in San Juan. A clinic is a group session in which baseball prospects are asked to try out. Al Campanis, the chief scout, did not have high hopes for the prospects. He did not think any player would be good enough for
50 the majors.

prospects
(prōs' pēkts')
n. people with possibilities

However, Roberto proved to be different. Campanis watched Roberto fire fast balls at the catcher. Then Campanis had the boys run the 60-yard dash. Roberto's record was 6.4 seconds. The world record was 6.1 seconds. The final test was batting the ball. So far, Roberto was a terrific discovery. Campanis knew he should not build false hope. Roberto had to hit the ball against one of the Dodgers' minor league pitchers. To everyone's surprise, line drives rocketed off
60 Roberto's bat. He was amazing!

line drives
hits that move low and fast, usually in a straight line

Campanis wanted to sign Roberto at once. However, major league rules did not allow a prospect to be signed before he graduated from high school. In 1954, after his high school graduation, Roberto joined the Dodgers' farm team in Montreal, Canada. Farm teams help young players get ready for the major leagues. At the time, scouts from other teams could watch young players. If the scouts wanted, they could sign a
70 contract with a player.

Even though the Dodgers wanted to sign Roberto, there was still some prejudice in the major leagues. Behind the scenes, major league teams avoided having more than four black players. The Dodgers already

prejudice
(prēj' ə dī's)
n. unfair treatment, usually based on race or religion

had four black players. They
did not want to lose Roberto,
so they sent him to Montreal.

The Dodgers kept quiet
80 about Roberto. They did not
play him often so that scouts
would not notice him.
However, their plan failed.
Scouts from the Pittsburgh
Pirates thought Roberto had
the potential to become a
great player. They quickly signed
a contract with him. At the time,
Pittsburgh was last in the National League.
90 When Roberto joined the team in 1955,
they had lost more than 100 games. The
team had placed last for three years
in a row. They needed a powerful player like
Roberto.

potential
(pə tēn' shəl)
n. ability

THINK IT THROUGH

What sets Roberto above the rest of the players?

FOCUS

Roberto's career as a Pittsburgh Pirate soars. Read to find out what he achieves.

Roberto played hard that first year. As a right fielder, he caught balls in midair to block home runs. Many times he threw his body against walls or fences to catch the ball. Pain mattered little to him.

As a batter, he swung at almost every ball. This is
100 usually the sign of a young, inexperienced player. Most
players learn to control their swing as they gain
experience. At the end of the year, Roberto's batting
average was .255. A batting average of .300 is better
than most. By the end of his second year, Roberto was
batting at .311.

When Roberto was not playing for the Pirates, he
would return to Puerto Rico. While he was there he
played in the Winter Leagues. Most ball players rest
during the off-season. Roberto continued to play no
110 matter how tired he was. He knew that his people
might never see him play in person. He wanted his
fans to enjoy watching him. In 1966, an article in
Sporting News reported, "Every Puerto Rican is a
Roberto Clemente fan."

Roberto was a hero. His fans knew Roberto had worked to become a professional baseball player. They also knew how much he cared about them.

In 1960 and 1971, Roberto led the Pirates to the World Series. The Pirates won both times, although
120 the odds were against them. Roberto was chosen the MVP (Most Valuable Player) in the 1971 World Series. He batted .414, hit 2 home runs, and had 12 hits and 4 RBIs. On September 30, 1972, Roberto had his 3000th career hit. At the time, only ten men had achieved this goal.

RBIs
runs batted in;
a rating of a
player's batting
ability

THINK IT THROUGH

What are Roberto's achievements as a player?

FOCUS

With all Roberto's success, he was still setting goals. Discover how Roberto wished to help others.

He was finally the baseball player he had dreamed of becoming. But Roberto had one more dream. It was perhaps his most important dream. With money from governments, businesses, and many other people, he
130 had plans to build Ciudad Deportiva (Sports City). He wanted to give the children of Puerto Rico a place where they could learn about sports. Roberto believed that young children could learn the value of hard work through sports. He wanted to give children something that would be rewarding and helpful. But his dream would have to wait.

On December 23, 1972, an earthquake struck Managua, Nicaragua. Roberto had visited Managua the year before. While he was there, Roberto met a

Clemente. In Carolina,
Puerto Rico, visitors are
greeted with a twelve-foot
statue of Roberto as they enter
the Roberto Clemente Sports
City—his final dream come true.

THINK IT THROUGH

1. Which of Roberto Clemente's goals was reached after his death?
2. Becoming a Baseball Hall of Fame member shows that Roberto was an outstanding player. Find evidence from the selection that shows him as an outstanding human being.
3. Look over the details about Roberto's disappearance. Use the information to make a time line of the events.